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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

Senior Review Panel

NIC 02286-84  
12 April 1984

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

FROM:   
Member, Senior Review Panel

SUBJECT: Intelligence Judgments Preceding the  
Sandinista Takeover in Nicaragua

1. This is a brief response to your request of 19 December 1984, on which you enlarged in a meeting on 12 January 1984, to examine turning points in the Nicaraguan story, and the extent to which the Intelligence Community identified them and speculated on possible outcomes.

2. In hindsight, it seems clear that the assassination of Pedro Chamorro, editor of La Prensa, on 10 January 1978 was a seminal event in the developing resistance to Somoza. To that point, the radical opposition--the FSLN--had never exceeded some 200 members in strength; suffered from internal dissension; and had little appeal to or influence on the population as a whole. The moderate opposition was almost totally inactive and unorganized. Chamorro's assassination generated an explosion of anti-Somoza sentiment and activities, despite the absence of any evidence linking him to the event.

3. During the following year the Sandinistas grew by a factor of ten. A countrywide strike in early 1978 was 80% effective--something that would have been unheard of the preceding year. And foreign support--largely military supplies provided first by Panama and Venezuela and later by Cuba via Panama--increased dramatically.

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4. The enormous impact and potential consequences of the Chamorro assassination were not broadly recognized immediately by the Community, although the increase in anti-Somoza activity in the Winter and Spring of 1978 was well reported. By mid-March of 1978 one perceptive analyst, writing in the CIA Latin American Weekly Review, identified the Chamorro incident as having triggered the release of long pent-up discontent and drew a bleak prospect for Somoza. The importance of the assassination was still ignored in a September 1978 IIM on the Situation in Nicaragua, the first Community paper since 1967, but the odds were believed to be against Somoza finishing out his term in 1981. Nevertheless, as late as February 1979, only five months before he left the country, Somoza's chances of finishing his term were rated at better than even in the NID, and current intelligence vacillated on his chances up to a month before his departure.

5. External support for the Sandinistas, especially from Panama and Venezuela, were early noted as critical to the FSLN. The Cuban connection was closely monitored, but apparently did not amount to more than ideological example, advice, training, and safe-haven until 1979. Mexican support, and its role in general, were almost ignored. On the other hand, the effect of the loss of US support and the impact of its disapproval of Somoza's human rights record, were noted as prime contributors to weakening his position.

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